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## Ex-cons look for scholarships and fresh start

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By Paul Alongi

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The ex-cons hope the rap sheets are in their past. Instead, they'd rather be on the honor roll.

One step in their new lives, they say, came Tuesday when they applied for scholarships that would pay for GED-prep classes at Greenville Technical College.

The \$125 scholarships will become available for the first time this January to 100 offenders on probation and parole. It's part of a new state program that aims to turn tax burdens into taxpayers.

Dana Hale, 26, said she's hoping for a second shot at an education after five years on probation.

Hale, who dropped out of school in 10th grade, was charged in 1998 with possession with intent to distribute marijuana within a half mile of a school, according to a warrant.

"That turned my life around," she said. "You just don't know how fast freedom and everything you take for granted every day can be taken away from you."

More education can mean more money for ex-convicts trying to support families and pay restitution to victims.

An offender with a ninth grade education earns about \$14,282 per year, while one with a GED or high school diploma makes about \$17,418, according to the state Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services.

In the last year, the state has paid \$22 million in victim restitution, including more than \$680,000 in Greenville County, the department says

The scholarship pays for one semester of classes to prepare for tests leading to the General Equivalency Degree. Many students need to take the class twice before



Debbie Hill, a teacher at Greenville Tech, helps Dana Hale sign up for classes that could lead to her getting a GED.  
Staff/Ken Osburn

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passing, said Corrie Wiley, associate dean of arts and sciences.

The scholarship became available to offenders through a partnership between Greenville Tech and the state Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services.

The goal is to turn the state's 50,000 offenders, including Greenville County's 3,256, into productive members of society.

"You can't do that without a high school diploma," Greenville Tech president Tom Barton said.

Sen. Ralph Anderson, D-Greenville, said many convicts leave prison without a job and wind up returning. But an education can help keep them out of trouble, he said.

"With Greenville Tech training these people...I think they could be more acceptable in the community," said Anderson, a member of the senate Corrections and Penology Committee.

Lance Brewton, who applied for a scholarship, said he hopes to earn his GED and eventually own a barbershop.

Warrants charged him with strong arm robbery in March and armed robbery in 1998. Brewton said it was a struggle with cocaine that landed him in prison for a year, but now he said he's ready to stay out of trouble.

"I'm very intelligent," he said. "If I put my mind to it, I can do anything."

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